

LaHood Pick for Transportation Has Stakeholders Buzzing (Congressional Quarterly)

By Colby Itkowitz and Kathryn A. Wolfe, CQ Staff

Transportation stakeholders were caught off guard Wednesday by news that retiring Rep.

Ray LaHood of Illinois, a centrist Republican who held a seat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee in the 1990s, will be the next Transportation secretary.

A senior Democrat confirmed Wednesday evening that LaHood would be President-elect

Barack Obama's choice. Obama has a news conference scheduled for Thursday, but it is unclear if he will announce LaHood's selection then. Obama's transition team did not comment. Transportation Department nominations move through the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

Although LaHood has a reputation for crossing party aisles and supporting infrastructure investment, transportation advocates had been hoping for someone with a long resume in the sector who could elevate infrastructure issues to greater national prominence. In some transportation quarters, the choice was met with confusion at best, and disappointment at worst.

"Did the entire A-team drop out?" one transportation lobbyist said. "I am a little disappointed that even for all of [Obama's] talk about infrastructure, once again Transportation's going to be like the last Cabinet secretary named. Where's somebody with some vision? I don't get it."

Obama has announced his selections for 13 of 15 Cabinet positions. Only Transportation and Labor remain to be filled.

The next head of the department will work with Congress on reauthorizations of highway and transit programs, and a reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration that will include a path forward for modernization of the air traffic control system.

Obama has pledged to make massive investments in transportation through an economic recovery package and the creation of a National Infrastructure Bank that would dedicate funds to national projects.

Nod to Bipartisanship

But many stakeholders said Wednesday that LaHood's selection, if made official, appears largely political, calculated to satisfy Obama's pledge to have a bipartisan Cabinet. (Holdover Defense Secretary

Robert M. Gates is currently the only Republican among Obama's selections.) LaHood is also an Arab-American — a Roman Catholic of Lebanese descent.

Dan Mattoon, a Washington lobbyist who is LaHood's friend, said LaHood's background would make him an effective lobbyist for the President-elect

Barack Obama's top priority, an economic recovery measure that has been projected to cost as much as \$600 billion by Speaker

Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. Pelosi said this week that most of the measure's cost would be for infrastructure funding.

Mattoon said LaHood would be important to the Obama administration because of his longstanding ties not only to the GOP's moderate wing but to the Republican leadership. "Bob [Defense Secretary Robert M.] Gates is a Republican but not a very active one.

Ray LaHood has been a Republican his whole life. He's a pragmatic Republican," Mattoon said.

LaHood, who represents large swaths of central and western Illinois, is a close friend of Rep.

Rahm Emanuel, D-Ill., who will serve as Obama's White House chief of staff.

LaHood as a lawmaker has often played the role of conciliator, working to narrow the differences between the parties and between factions in his own party. He was one of three members of the big 1994 Republican freshman class not to sign the GOP's "Contract with America";

He is a former staff member and protege of former House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel, whose seat he now holds. For years, he organized bipartisan "civility" retreats to try to create personal bonds between members of the often warring parties. But those have faded away in recent years, as acrimony has grown.

Michel said Wednesday he was unaware of LaHood's reported selection for Transportation secretary, but added, "He certainly fits the bill in terms of wanting to work with the other side of the aisle."

Rep.

Michael N. Castle, R-Del., one of a fast-dwindling group of GOP moderates in the House, hailed LaHood's selection, calling him "a pragmatist who places politics on the back burner in order to get things done. Ray will be an asset to the incoming administration with his ability to work on the issues that matter," Castle said.

LaHood may face some opposition from labor unions, particularly those involved in aviation issues. In 2007 LaHood voted against an FAA reauthorization bill that included language long sought by the National Air Traffic Controllers Association that would have helped resolve in the union's favor a longstanding and bitter contract dispute with the FAA.

But other transportation insiders, while surprised, were hopeful that LaHood would bring the same bipartisan spirit to the administration as he has in Congress.

Jack L. Schenendorf, vice chairman of the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Committee, said he would feel comfortable with LaHood in the role.

"I think he will see and understand the national role in transportation," he said. "That's not to say it's not surprising. But he's somebody who would do a good job."

Rod Nofziger, the director of government affairs for the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, said he'd heard from a few people the LaHood would get the nomination.

And unlike others, Nofziger views it as a perfect choice.

"Lahood is someone who has dealt with the politics of transportation, knows the dynamics, knows the players," Nofziger said. "He has in the past been an advocate for transportation infrastructure investment in general. And there's no reason he would change that given how much focus the President-elect has put on transportation infrastructure."

Terry O'Sullivan, president of the Laborers' International Union of North America, said LaHood has been "a friend to our union when it comes to construction and transportation issues."

Senior GOP lawmakers and aides offered high praise for LaHood.

"President-elect Obama said he would appoint Republicans to his Cabinet, and the addition of Rep. LaHood would be a welcome sign in helping fulfill that promise," said Kevin Smith, a spokesman for Minority Leader

John A. Boehner, R-Ohio. LaHood is a longtime Boehner ally, and was an early backer in his surprising victory over outgoing Minority Whip

Roy Blunt, R-Mo., in the head-to-head race to succeed former Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, (1985-2006).

An Emanuel Insider

LaHood's close ties to Emanuel were evident in his help with organizing the regular dinners that a half-dozen Republicans and Democrats had with Emanuel in Washington restaurants over the last year. Others in that group included Castle and Rep.

Adam Smith, D-Wash., and Rep.

Fred Upton, R-Mich.

LaHood's selection also may signal an ambitious effort by Obama and Emanuel to woo moderate Republicans in both chambers on a broad range of issues such as a \$10 billion expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) that President Bush vetoed that many moderates supported. In addition moderates and pro-union Republicans from the nation's industrial heartland — including LaHood and Castle — provided many of the 32 GOP votes in favor of the \$14 billion automobile rescue package that passed the House, 237-170, Dec. 10, and died in the Senate.

Jonathan Allen, David Nather and Alan K. Ota contributed to this story.

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